

Editorial: Good news for charter schools

Editorial
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Charter schools still have a fighting chance, thanks to two bipartisan bills in the Legislature, some creative thinking and a timely grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

We support the schools because they provide an outlet for innovation and a learning environment for students who may not thrive in a traditional setting. If successful, they can provide the impetus for traditional schools to adopt more effective methods.

Voters narrowly adopted a charter school initiative in 2012, but the Supreme Court ruled the measure unconstitutional just as classes were getting underway last fall.

The two Spokane charters were authorized by Spokane Public Schools, which became the only school district in the state to view them as an opportunity, not a hindrance. Nonetheless, Pride Prep and Spokane International Academy were lumped with schools authorized by the Washington State Charter Commission when the court ruled that charters aren't "common schools" and thus cannot receive funds intended for traditional schools.

The Washington State Charter Schools Association has raised enough private money to keep the nine schools open through this school year.

The challenge for lawmakers is to propose a way for charters to retain autonomy while being directly accountable to the public, or to find a funding source that would pass constitutional muster.

A bill sponsored by Spokane Sens. Andy Billig, a Democrat, and Michael Baumgartner, a Republican, would place charters under elected school district boards, which would contract with nonprofit organizations to run the schools. Charters would negotiate with districts for freedom and flexibility on issues such as staff, curriculum and school hours, but they would still have to comply with state laws, regulations and standards.

A bill by Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, and Rep. Eric Pettigrew, D-Renton, would ensure that charter school funding come from the state's Opportunity Pathways Account, which is financed by the state lottery and is not restricted to common schools. The account already finances higher education grants and scholarships, and programs designed for innovation.

The court ruled that charter schools, as currently set up, cannot receive tax dollars from general-fund accounts.

Meanwhile, The Gates Foundation awarded \$2.1 million to the small Mary Walker School District, north of Spokane, which had agreed to absorb six of the state's charter schools under its elected board as a temporary solution. The schools would be classified as Alternative Learning Experience programs, which allow for off-campus instruction.

This flurry of activity on multiple fronts is good news for people who worked hard to bring charter schools to Washington. It's also heartening to parents whose children are thriving in their new environments.

Given the will shown by so many to make these schools succeed, we are confident a solution will emerge that earns a passing grade from the Supreme Court.

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